

This Week in Congress

December 12, 2005

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." I hope you find this newsletter useful.

Japan Announces Reopening of Market to U.S. Beef

Kansas ranchers and Japanese consumers have a reason to celebrate today as Japan's Agricultural and Health Ministries announced the reopening of its market to U.S. beef. The announcement comes after a five-month review of the safety of U.S. beef by a Japanese BSE panel and four weeks of public hearings by the Japanese government. The U.S. is now able to export beef from cattle 20 months of age and younger to Japan.

This is a significant step toward regaining access to this important market and opening other markets around the world. U.S. safeguards for consumer health and practices based on sound science prevailed against this unjust two-year long ban. **Japanese consumers can be confident that American beef is safe and can once again enjoy the same high quality beef that Americans have always enjoyed.**

A single case of BSE in a Canadian-born animal prompted Japan to close its border to U.S. beef in December 2003. My efforts to reopen the border began immediately after the ban and included introduction of a resolution in March calling for sanctions to be used against Japan if it failed to abide by its October 2004 agreement to reopen its border. More than 85 of my colleagues joined the effort by cosponsoring the resolution. In addition, I met with President Bush and U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman to discuss this issue and led more than 100 Members of Congress in asking President Bush to make restoring market access for U.S. beef to Japan his highest economic priority. I also highlighted the importance of this issue in testimony before the House Ways and Means Committee and in a speech to the U.S. House of Representatives.

The beef industry is a vital component of the Kansas economy. No congressional district in the nation has more to gain from the Japanese beef market than the First Congressional District of Kansas. But the U.S. will have to work hard to regain this important market and increase the age of cattle from which meat can be exported to Japan.

From Hope to Paradise: Beginning the Tenth Annual Big First Listening Tour

This week I launched my 10th annual Big First Listening Tour. From Hope to Paradise, I will visit communities in each county of the First Congressional District. Additional counties and the expansion of the First District, combined with Congress going out of session for the holidays, prompted my early start of the 2006 tour.

Friday I made tour stop number one in Hope, located in Dickinson County, where I met with community members at First National Bank. I then traveled to Saline County to the community of Gypsum where a group gathered at Central National Bank to visit with me.

The entire schedule for tour stops is still being developed due to the uncertainty of the congressional schedule in the New Year. Please visit my website in the coming weeks to see when I will be visiting your area.

House Agriculture Committee Reviews USDA Watershed Programs

The Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Rural Development and Research reviewed the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) watershed programs this week. USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers watershed programs that are designed to maintain safe drinking water, control erosion, preserve wildlife habitat and implement flood protection measures.

The Subcommittee heard from NRCS Chief Bruce Knight and various conservation and watershed district representatives about funding and the current status of projects. Funding demands cannot be met for the size and scope of additional flood control dams needing to be built and existing flood control dams that are approaching or have exceeded their intended 50-year life span.

This reduced funding makes the development of new projects more challenging. Kansas has several watersheds waiting for NRCS planning and more than 200 dams needing to be built. I am working to help make sure NRCS is given a chance to prioritize various projects and administer funds according to our needs in Kansas.

Extending Current Tax Laws

This week the House voted to extend several tax rate reductions. On Wednesday, the House passed legislation that extends the alternative minimum tax (AMT) exemption amounts through 2006 and adjusts them for inflation. Also, on Thursday, the House passed H.R. 4297, the Tax Relief Extension Reconciliation Act. This legislation includes many provisions that extend current laws providing tax relief to Americans. It includes tax provisions relating to higher education expenses, teacher classroom expenses and small business expensing. It also extends the 15 percent tax rate on capital gains and dividend income through 2010. The Senate has also passed tax relief legislation. A conference committee will now meet to negotiate the differences between the House and Senate versions of the legislation.

Continuing Support of Bostwick Irrigation Farmers

This week I testified before the House Resources Subcommittee on Water and Power to explain the need for legislation I introduced with Congressman Tom Osborne (R-NE) to assist farmers in four irrigation districts, two in Kansas and two in Nebraska. The Kansas portion of the Bostwick Irrigation District is located in Republic, Jewell and Cloud Counties.

Farmers in these irrigation districts have been paying for water they have not been receiving. Two of the districts have not received any water, and the other two have received only limited amounts. H.R. 4000 would modify payment contracts between the Bureau of Reclamation and Kansas Bostwick Irrigation District No. 2, the Bostwick Irrigation District of Nebraska, the French-Cambridge Irrigation District and the Webster Irrigation District No. 4. This legislation will ease the burden on producers by lengthening the payment period by 10 years.

This modification would yield the Bureau of Reclamation the same number of dollars, but because the payments would be made over a longer period of time, the annual payment amounts would be reduced. The timing of this legislation is significant as farmers in Kansas and Nebraska are struggling to survive the financial hardship that five years of drought has brought to the region.

Extending the Terrorism Risk Insurance Act

On Tuesday, I supported House passage of H.R. 4314, the Terrorism Risk Insurance Extension Act (TRIA), which extends this legislation through December 31, 2007. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many businesses were not able to purchase insurance for potential losses from a terrorist attack. Congress recognized the importance of this insurance coverage for the stability of the U.S. economy and enacted the Terrorism Risk Insurance Act of 2002. This law created a program, scheduled to expire on December 31, 2005, to insure terrorism losses. The Senate approved TRIA extension legislation on November 18, and it will now be considered in a conference committee.

Attending the White House Christmas Ball with my Daughter

It was a pleasure for me to have my oldest daughter, Kelsey, travel to Washington, D.C., with me this week to attend the White House Christmas Ball. It was nice to see Members put aside partisan differences and spend an evening celebrating the holidays.

In the Office

In my office this week from Topeka was Chris Tilden, Director of the Kansas Department of Local and Rural Health, to present an award from the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health and to discuss rural health care issues, including funding and physician and nurse recruiting and retention. The award recognizes efforts to promote quality health care services for all rural Americans.

Cynthia Smith of Leavenworth was in representing Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth Health System to talk about issues hospitals are facing and the importance of inpatient rehabilitation facilities. State Representative Scott Schwab of Olathe stopped by my office to say hello and talk about the 2006 legislative session. Scott is a Colby native and a graduate of Fort Hays State University. Earl Watkins of Hays and Charles Ayers of Leoti were in representing Sunflower Electric this week to meet with U.S. Department of Agriculture officials Dale Moore and Jim Andrew for a discussion on Sunflower Electric's efforts to bring new power plants to Kansas.

Dr. Janet and Melvin Splitter of Great Bend stopped by my office this week to discuss the White House Conference on Aging. In Great Bend, Dr. Splitter is a dietician for ElderCare-Friendship Meals. She also has experience in higher education and has worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development. Dr. Splitter is my delegate to the White House conference, which brings together experts from around the country to discuss aging issues such as retirement and pensions, assisted living, health care, nutrition, and community services such as transportation. During the conference, Dr. Splitter and the other delegates voted to approve 50 different resolutions, or statements, that will help define future federal policies affecting the elderly.

Colonel Mike Rossi and Larry Meyers with the Kansas City Army Corps of Engineers were in to discuss their continuing environmental clean up efforts at Salina Municipal Airport, former site of Schilling Air Force Base.

In my office this week for a tour of the Capitol building were Clifford and Neva Edwards of Hays, along with Cecily Hill of Stafford, Virginia. Eric, Cheri and Christopher Lund of Salina were also in for a tour. The Lunds were here visiting their son, Tyler, who is currently serving as an intern in my Washington, D.C., office.

Very truly yours,

Jerry